Please cite this paper as follows: Vince, R. (2019). Reflections on the role of bemusement in institutional disruption. *Journal of Management Inquiry* (forthcoming).

This version of the paper was accepted by the Journal of Management Inquiry on 3 June 2019. Acceptance was conditional on minor amendments and an updated version will be added once it has been through JMI copy editing.

Reflections on the role of bemusement in institutional disruption

Russ Vince
Professor of Leadership and Change
School of Management, University of Bath
Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom
Phone: +44(0)1225-384419
Email: r.vince@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

In this essay I reflect on the disruptive potential of bemusement. When people are bemused, we feel confused or bewildered. We can also feel wry pleasure, especially if we are bemused by something perplexing, that confounds expectations or norms. I explore how the affective tensions of bemusement can unsettle persons' emotional investment in institutional order. I argue that disruption arises from surfacing the absurdities that are part of what is accepted as normal, and I illustrate this with a discussion of the 'Dismaland Bemusement Park'. I assert the importance of confounding stability, order and rationality by recognizing the parallel existence of confusion, absurdity and illogics. Practical access to these parallel dynamics arises from the art of cultural subversion. Such an art both politicizes and gives pleasure to those involved in creative disruption; and it embraces the ensuing confusion as a critique – as a potentially insightful twist on institutional order.

Keywords: Bemusement, institutional disruption, emotions in institutions, mixed-emotions, Banksy.

Introduction

When people are *bemused*, we feel confused or bewildered. We might also be feeling a wry pleasure, especially if we are bemused by something that is surprising or perplexing in such a way as to confound an expectation or norm. In this essay, I reflect on the disruptive potential of bemusement. My main aim is to explore an affective tension that is part of being bemused, which might unsettle persons' emotional investment in institutional order. It has been argued that persons are governed by channelling their emotional investment toward fundamental institutional ideals (Lok, Creed, DeJordy & Voronov, 2017). In addition, while persons may cognitively commit to reproducing the current order, at an unconscious level they may experience emotions targeted at subverting it (Voronov & Vince, 2012). This raises a question concerning the nature of emotional investment in disrupting the institutional ideals that govern us. I argue that bemusement is useful in this regard because it produces feelings of confusion and of wry pleasure, which undermine *and* underpin our capacity to think.

I am making two contributions to organizational institutionalism (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby, 2017). First, I consider the disruptive potential and organizational implications of bemusement. I argue that bemusement can *politicize* and give pleasure to those involved in creative disruption, as well as surfacing insights into institutional order. Second, bemusement offers an avenue through which to explore the disruptive power of mixed emotions and their enactment. This is connected to a contemporary interest in the institutional and organizational consequences of reflexive engagement with emotional dynamics (Ruebottom and Auster, 2018), that can help to *unsettle* actors from their attachments to taken-for-granted assumptions. Mixed emotions span the boundary between persons' responses to institutional reproduction and resistance; between their connection and disconnection with the social order. Tensions arising from mixed emotions point towards the inseparability of creation and disruption in persons' institutional effort.

The essay proceeds as follows. I start by providing a definition of bemusement in the context of management and organization studies. I define bemusement alongside organizational perspectives on humour and cynicism, which also produce affective tensions (see Table 1, below). I then frame bemusement as a construct alongside three other perspectives on

institutional disruption. I illustrate bemusement with a discussion of the 'Dismaland Bemusement Park', a temporary art installation that took place over five weeks during the summer of 2015, as well as other examples of creative disruption that are part of persons' lived experience of crafting and being subject to bemusement. I use these examples to argue for the importance of confounding stability, order and rationality within organizations and institutions by recognizing the parallel existence of confusion, absurdity and illogics.

Defining Bemusement

I define bemusement and set it in the context of management and organization studies as follows:

> Bemusement is an affective state characterised by feelings of confusion or pleasure, as well as concurrent mixed feelings of *both* confusion *and* pleasure, that unsettle people and organizations. For the person, feelings of confusion may arise from bewilderment or perplexity, from a sense of not knowing what is going on. Alternatively, a person may experience wry pleasure or surprise at feeling unsettled, leading to a new perspective or insight. Bemusement is of interest to management and organizational scholars for the ways in which it can confound established expectations or norms. Experiences of bemusement both undermine and stimulate our capacity to think. They invite us to be reflexive about our own and others' connections with a prevailing order.

Emotionally, bemusement can cause people to feel unsettled (both positively and negatively). On one hand it produces feelings of confusion, on the other, it stimulates wry amusement or pleasure. Disconcertingly, confusion and wry amusement can also be felt concurrently. Cognitively, bemusement can inspire us to think differently about what is given. It undermines our capacity to think because what appears to be normal can start to seem different, even absurd. Bemusement enhances our capacity to think because such absurdity creates opportunities to perceive things differently and to act on these perceptions. The practical advantage of bemusement is that it offers people in organizations and institutions one possibility for being reflexive, which means: 'questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have' (Cunliffe, 2016 p 2). Behaviourally therefore, bemusement invites us to be reflexive about how we are tied into and can subvert the institutional ideals that govern us; to

connect with tensions and contradictions implicit within the enactment of those ideals; and it encourages action through a politicised perspective on established norms.

An Example

I teach a leadership module on our Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. This is a very different learning experience for our MBA students from all their other modules because I use an approach based on psychodynamic or group relations theory (Author, 2016). The students participate in a five-day experiential workshop designed to help them to comprehend the emotional, relational and political context within which leadership is practiced. This is a challenging experience and the students often find themselves unsettled and in a state of confusion, particularly for the first two or three days. They are most certainly bemused by this approach. They try to defend against it in various ways at the same time as they become open to it and begin to perceive the value of it. It generates mixed feelings.

As the MBA students go through a range of experiential exercises, each designed to be part of an overall process for understanding leadership thought and action, they begin to be aware of the order that they have collectively created in the MBA group, and its consequences for learning and for leadership. The experiential exercises become more challenging as the week progresses, but they also become used to the idea of using their own 'here and now' experience of the dynamics of the MBA group as a way of comprehending what leadership involves in practice, as well as the emotional, relational and political context in which it is done.

Towards the end of the week I ask students to 'place yourself on a line from top to bottom on the basis of your position in this group'. The idea of this exercise is to address the tendency within the MBA group to avoid differences that make a difference; to help to surface implicit power relations in the group; and to consider the implications of being in chosen or assigned 'positions' in the group (as well as how this relates to their working lives). Finding a place on the line involves negotiating with others, which raises fears (that are integral to our MBA groups) about undermining the self and upsetting others. In this exercise I am deliberately seeking to unsettle MBA students' investment in the order they have consciously and unconsciously created.

In one group, Jacqueline (one of ten women in a group of twenty-four) quickly takes herself to the top of the line. She will not budge and is confronted by a small group of men who have also moved towards the top of the line. To keep this example brief, the students are individually and collectively bemused (they have concurrent mixed feelings of confusion and pleasure) by the exercise itself, and I know that they will be. Some of the male participants are perplexed and irritated by Jacqueline's determined behaviour and refusal to move. Jacqueline generates bemusement and she is bemused. She has mixed feelings of both confusion and pleasure. In her journal, she reflected:

> 'During the Line of Power Exercise, I moved toward the top of the line. I told myself and those around me that I would be willing to move if someone else saw themselves at the top position. However, my words and actions were not aligned. One person noted that he made a comment about being at the top and I dismissed it, unwilling to move. Several others said it appeared I had staked my claim to the top spot and was holding my ground. This was a revelation because I had told myself that I would be happy to relinquish the position to someone else who felt they deserved it, but my actions, thoughts, and declarations were contradictory.'

To summarise this example. This is a challenging module that is created to unsettle MBA students as an integral part of the process of educating them. It does this by confounding their expectations on learning about leadership; and by deliberately engaging with the collective order they have explicitly and implicitly created as a group. Students have the freedom to be confused even though they may well refuse or defend against that freedom. Students are invited to perceive things differently, but it is not assumed that they will. Students (like Jacqueline) take pleasure in the insights that emerge from their explorations, but also become aware of mixed emotions and contradictions. In other words, here bemusement (the pleasure and confusion of confounding expectations about power as it is experienced and felt) contributes to reflexive capabilities, and to the creative disruption of expected ways to learn about leadership.

Situating Bemusement

Organizational scholars have identified other feelings, particularly humour (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007) and cynicism (Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar, 1998), that contribute to

organizational tensions and contradictions. To develop 'bemusement', I have set my definition alongside definitions of humour and cynicism. I identify the emotional orientation of each, as well as the ongoing tensions they generate. Tensions are important because they help us to comprehend how people maintain the institutional systems they feel unhappy about, with emotions that also prompt resistance or change (Lok et al., 2017).

(Insert Table 1 here)

In Table 1, I identify and compare the tensions arising from humour, cynicism and bemusement. The literature on humour in organizations identifies tensions between its capacity to underpin resistance and to support social control (Huber and Brown, 2017). While humour has been shown to be subversive (Holmes, 2000; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007), it is also recognised that such challenges have limitations (Contu, 2008) and that humour can have a 'corrective' function (Billig, 2005) that contributes to reinforcing established norms and expectations. Organizational cynicism also mobilises tensions. On one hand, people become cynical about their organization because they perceive a lack of integrity, experience adverse emotional reactions, and behave (e.g.) defensively or dismissively. On the other hand, cynicism is seen as functional for organizations because cynics provide a check 'on the temptation to place expediency over principle or the temptation to assume that self-interested or underhanded behaviour will go undetected' (Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar, 1998 p 347). Bemusement also contains tensions between its potential as a form of resistance and the limited or 'decaf' nature of such resistance (Contu, 2008). However, I argue that the value of bemusement as a form of cultural subversion is in its ability to *both* undermine and encourage people's capacity to think differently. The mixed emotional experience generated by bemusement creates opportunities for being reflexive and for critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016). I use various examples to illustrate my argument in the 'experiencing bemusement' and 'causing bemusement' sections of the essay.

Framing Bemusement

My exploration of bemusement is set in the context of the current interest in emotions and institutions (Fan & Zietsma, 2017; Gill & Burrow, 2017; Jarvis, 2017; Lok et al., 2017; Massa, Helms, Voronov & Wang, 2016; Moisander, Hirsto & Fahy, 2016; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017; Voronov & Weber, 2016). Thus far, researchers have been interested in *social*

emotions, which hold people together in institutional processes (Creed et al., 2014); and in *moral* emotions, that underpin social and professional values, as well as societal interests (Haidt, 2003; Wright, Zammuto & Liesch, 2017). Bemusement is not a strong and pervasive social emotion, like shame (Creed et al., 2014), nor is it linked to a consistent set of moral values, for example the overarching notion of care that is consistent across different medical and surgical sub-specialities (Wright, Zammuto & Liesch, 2017). My argument is that bemusement pulls us in two directions, and that it is these mixed emotions, and the tensions that sustain them, that could prove disruptive of institutional order.

Institutional disruption involves unsettling or subverting the mechanisms that lead people to comply with existing institutional order. This might entail *determined adherence to a set of counter-values*. For example, Cascio & Luthans (2014) discuss how political prisoners imprisoned at Robben Island transformed the abuse and subjugation of their experience by separating existing rules and practices from their moral foundations, to emphasize the shared roles from all racial groups in South Africa within a future democratic society. This was achieved through undermining the costs and penalties associated with subverting taken for granted assumptions. Institutional disruption also *depends on persistence over time*. For example, Styhre (2014) describes the ways in which female ministers became accepted as legitimate servants of the church as 'a continuous and ongoing activity (of disruption) with no clearly defined end points' (Styhre, 2014, p. 115).

Institutional disruption can occur through *reflexive engagement with emotional dynamics* that dis-embed actors from their ideological attachments and re-embed them within the norms of a new community of actors. For example, Ruebottom and Auster (2018) argue that: 'unpacking the emotional dynamics underpinning how reflexivity can be generated is crucial for fully understanding the recursive influence between social structure and emotions, whereby emotions can also *alter* understandings and facilitate new structural arrangements' (Ruebottom and Auster, 2018 p 468). Their findings were generated from a study of 'We Day', a 'rock concert for social change' organized by the non-profit organization, Free the Children. They suggest that reflexive dis/embedding occurred at this event through two complementary mechanisms: personal narratives of injustice and action (that draw attention to 'the often-invisible arrangements that organize the social world') and individual-collective empowering, which involves dis-embedding audience members from their existing environment and embedding them within a new community of 'change-makers'. This new

community provides continuing support for their emerging understanding. This study is particularly helpful in exploring the important role of emotions in the generation of reflexivity.

I speculate on a fourth possibility for institutional disruption, one that is also associated with reflexive engagement with emotional dynamics. This involves *surfacing the absurdities that are part of what is accepted as given or normal*. In his discussion of the contemporary 'images of organization' that we require for organizational analysis, McCabe (2016) has proposed the notion of Lewis Carroll's 'Wonderland' as an important, alternative organizational metaphor. His argument is that organizational scholars need an image of organization that places centre stage issues such as absurdity, irrationality, uncertainty and disorder. To put this a different way: 'if we think about organizations through metaphors that emphasize stability, order, rationality and manageability, then much of organizational life is left out' (McCabe, 2016, p. 946).

Recent efforts have been made to explore and explain the value of the contradictory relationship between rationality and irrationally in organizations and institutions. For example, decision-makers may be guided by a 'logic of absurdity' (Newark, 2018), through which they knowingly choose to dedicate themselves to an irrational course of action. The logic of absurdity 'couples unwavering recognition of the undesirable expected consequences of one's actions with complete devotion to those actions' (Newark, 2018, p. 7). A certain freedom emerges when a person knowingly and wilfully chooses irrational action; when she can both demonstrate the capacity for rational judgment and simultaneously exercise the right to wilfully ignore it. Similarly (and differently), 'institutional illogics' (Vince, 2018) refers to the structuring and unsettling effects of unconscious dynamics, particularly social defenses and shared fantasies, on organizations and institutions. Illogics are without reason, they can defy and disrupt our frames of reference, but they are also intimately connected to the everyday challenges of peoples' lives within social structures. The term institutional illogics suggests that our frames of reference can be illusory or nonrational, despite also feeling natural or normal. Logics and illogics can be understood as two sides of the same coin, always in tension, yet mutually necessary. Using the notion of illogics we can consider, for example, how and why negative consequences are embedded in seemingly positive emotions; and explore positive responses to hatred and other negative emotions (Vince, 2018). This

essay offers one approach to furthering such perspectives in the context of organizational institutionalism.

Experiencing Bemusement

One way in which this perspective has been brought to life recently is by the British 'satirical street artist', Banksy, who created his 'Dismaland Bemusement Park' ('a sinister twist on Disneyland') in my local seaside town of Weston-super-Mare[1]. This art installation was an act of creative absurdity, or absurd creativity (I am not sure which). However, the BBC reported that 'the dark attraction brought more than 150,000 paying visitors and £20m to the seaside town'[2]. Banksy described his bemusement park as 'a festival of art, amusements and entry level anarchism' (Guru-Murthy, 2015).

Dismaland provides an organizational image through which to perceive some of the ways in which bemusement might inform peoples' interactions in organizations, as well as how these connect with 'self-reproducing social order' (Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 5). For example, at the beginning of the experience was the 'security screening room' (Image 1), in which all the usual artefacts of security screening (screening frame, security cameras, x-ray screens, luggage trays and conveyer belt, etc.) were constructed out of cardboard. Despite being a very flimsy and self-mocking construction, the very real emotions evoked for visitors by 'security' were exploited by the staff, who 'would be watching for those who avoided eye contact, and who would of course be the best victims' (Youds, 2016, p. 12). Before visitors passed through into the main exhibits, the dismal 'security' staff confronted them with a range of challenges that approximated to familiar experiences in (e.g.) airport security. For example, instead of 'did you pack your own suitcase' they might ask, 'did you do your own hair, Sir?' (Youds, 2016, p. 12). Instead of asking people to lift their arms for a body search, security staff asked visitors to stand on one leg and 'touch your nose for me, sir' (Green, 2015). At once both ridiculous and evocative, the passage through the security screening room said much about crossing boundaries, as well as the process and experience of (in)security.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dismaland
[2] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-34364808

(Insert Image 1 and Image 2 here)

Dismaland temporarily took over the derelict site of a former lido on the beach at Weston-super-Mare. The lido closed in 2000 and the site has been slowly rotting and subject to haphazard local politics ever since. Thinking about the choice of venue in broader, more institutional terms, it was not difficult for people to make the link between 'a decaying and crumbling structure as a mirror of modern Britain, its institutions eroded and in turmoil' (Youds, 2016, p. 55). This interpretation was reinforced, for example, by exhibits like the 'Cinderella Coach Crash' (Image 2) a tableau alluding (without subtlety) to the death of Princess Diana. After they have left the exhibit, visitors find that they can buy a picture of themselves amongst the paparazzi pack. 'As you exit the castle, you can buy the "souvenir picture" taken at the beginning, at "just £5 for a 6x8-inch photograph complete with Dismaland display card". The catch? The background of the picture shows Cinderella's fatal accident, with you grinning in the foreground. Gotcha' (Green, 2015, p. 2).

I wanted to find out more about the individual and collective nature of *dismal work*; about what it was like for the people working in a 'Bemusement Park', as well as how this might be linked to self-reproducing social order (perpetuating the dismal way). There is limited information from 'Dismals' (as they became known), but 'a self-confessed Dismaland obsessive' (Youds, 2016) undertook eleven interviews with staff from which some basic ideas can be drawn. First, some reported *being politicized by the experience*. 'It's made me look at things differently, it's made me think a little more. I read lots more now, different stories and views' (Danika); 'it's changed my views a lot, I pay attention to things going on in the world more' (Lucy), (Youds, 2016, p. 36). Second, *being dismal brought pleasure to the staff role*. Being miserable made them happy, a joyful twist on the emotional labor of smiling enthusiasm for the customer. 'I worked 7 days a week for six weeks, it was really full on, I loved it and thought I want to make the most of the opportunity… It was hard going from Dismaland to a job in a clothes shop. My bosses at my other part time job were saying I needed to smile. My first shift back in retail, I found it hard to be happy' (Farhath, in Youds, 2016, p. 28). Third, *there was enjoyment in not knowing what was going on*. The confusion offered opportunities for playfulness, and the situations they found themselves in required them to use their imaginations in the service of reproducing the dismal order. 'You didn't know what was going on for much of the time. You didn't know what was meant to be dismal and what wasn't. It was the best place to work ever…' (Kurtis, in Youds, 2016, p. 23).

Dismaland can be understood as a temporary art exhibition, lasting five weeks, by an international group of 'satirical artists'. However, like all organizations and institutions, its underlying emotional complexities offer continuing opportunities for speculation, interpretation and confusion. As a way of helping us to comprehend the mixed emotional dynamics of disruption, it can also be understood as an emotionally charged, political statement on Disneyfication, capitalism, the British royal family, and the migration crisis (amongst other things). It is replete with mixed emotion. Even as we abhor aspects of the paparazzi's behaviour, or other elements of the social order, we discover ourselves to be complicit in them. Its absurdity was its strength and its success. Its clarity arose at times from the confusion it generated. Dismaland provided a vivid image of structured enactment and interpretation, of building and wrecking, which both critiqued and boosted consumerism (in five weeks it brought £20 million into an economically challenged area of the UK).

Not everyone was enamored by the experience of Dismaland. For example: 'I felt I was participating in a charade where everyone has to pretend that this is a better joke than it is… Devoid of ambiguity or mystery, everything he has created here is inert and unengaging. Cinderella dies, and no one gives a toss.' (Jones, 2015). Similarly, 'it's like someone took a week of the most pained *Guardian* op-eds and gave them to a bunch of fifth-formers who call themselves anarchists just to piss off their well-off parents and told them to turn them into bits of art[3]' (O'Neill, 2015). Looking through the various press cuttings on the event, I was struck by the strength of emotion on either side of the fence and the distinct lack of anyone sitting on it. This is instructive for our understanding of emotions in institutions. It suggests that we may have to look beneath the idea of positive social and moral emotional connections among actors producing *shared* values or logics (Fan & Zietsma, 2017). In addition, it will be useful to acknowledge and explore the function of mixed emotions in taking persons to the uncomfortable (and creative) edge of disruption. Dismaland was neither this or that, coherence or disorder, acting out or interpretation, but it was both and transcended both. It alludes to a different way of seeing and being within institutions, as well as our efforts within them. We might need to regard them as neither just a product of intent or desire, but as something akin to works of art – both skillful artifacts and expressions of (our relations to)

[3] The term 'fifth-former' refers to a 15/16-year-old in the British School system. The *Guardian* is a national newspaper in the UK broadly associated with the centre/ left of politics.

social order.

Causing Bemusement

The disruptive potential of bemusement becomes possible when absurdities that are integral to what is accepted as given or normal can be surfaced in ways that cause bemusement. An *unexpected twist* is all it takes. Dismaland provides an example of the temporary institutionalization of bemusement; but it is not too difficult to find other, everyday examples of bemusement in persons' lived experience of institutions.

(Insert Image 3 here)

During a short heat-wave in June 2017, a group of 30 teenage boys, all pupils at the Isca Academy in Devon, UK, attended school in tartan-patterned skirts. 'Some had borrowed from girlfriends, others from sisters. A few had gone the extra mile and shaved their legs' (Morris, 2017). The boys had asked their teachers if they could swap their long trousers for shorts because of the heat, but they could not as shorts were not permitted under the school's uniform policy. The boys protested that girls were allowed bare legs, and the school responded that the boys were free to wear skirts if they chose. They did. Their story was picked up by international media and, as a result, the local County Council had to help the school out with inquiries. 'A spokesperson said: "About 30 boys arrived at school this morning wearing school skirts. None of the boys have been penalised – no one was put in isolation or detention for wearing a skirt." (Morris, 2017). The mother of one of the boys told the reporter: "My 14-year-old son wanted to wear shorts. The Head Teacher told them: 'Well, you can wear a skirt if you like' – but I think she was being sarcastic. However, children tend to take you literally, and because she told them it was OK, there was nothing she could do as long as they were *school* skirts" (Morris, 2017).

The Creative Edge of Disruption

Jason Dorley-Brown is a '*Guerrilla Gardener*' (BBC News, 2017). In the city where my University is situated, he fills in potholes in the road (of which there are many) with compost, before planting a range of colorful flowers (Image 4). 'We're very careful to make sure when we fill in a pothole… It's not on a blind corner, it's not on a corner where there's overtaking,

it's not on a narrow road. We sort of want them to be distracting to a certain extent, but people can drive over them. We're not fixing potholes here, what we are doing is filling potholes to raise awareness' (BBC News, 2017). Officers from the local Council however, have pointed out that his actions 'do not meet the required standards'.

(Insert Image 4 and Image 5 here)

Subversive knitters (and yarn bombers) aim to subvert and rebuke by covering objects in knitting and crochet. For example, Marianne Joergensen organized volunteers from Denmark, the UK, USA, and other countries, who all sent knitted and crocheted squares as a contribution to protests against Denmark's involvement in the Iraq war. She stitched a pink blanket over a combat tank to create a 'tank cosy' (2006), (Image 5). She wrote: '…knitting signals home, care, closeness and time for reflection. Ever since Denmark became involved in the war in Iraq I have made different variations of pink tanks, and I intend to keep doing that, until the war ends. For me, the tank is a symbol of stepping over other people's borders. When it is covered in pink, it becomes completely unarmed and it loses its authority' (http://www.threadforthought.net/subversive-knitting/ downloaded Feb 7, 2018).

(Insert Image 6 here)

Shiden Tekle and his friends (all 17 years old at the time) were fed-up with the lack of black faces in films and TV shows. With support from the Advocacy Academy, they founded the group 'Legally Black' to find ways to challenge people's perceptions and assumptions about black people in the media. Assisted by the subversive advertising organization, The Special Patrol Group (https://en-gb.facebook.com/specialpatrols/), they recreated famous film posters with themselves replacing the lead characters. These were positioned in bus-stop billboards around Brixton, London. 'The advertising company that owns most of the bus stop billboard spaces, did not respond to requests for comment' (Neate, 2018). In subsequent posters, Shiden persuaded his dad to stand in for James Bond (in the Skyfall poster) and his mum to replace (the new female) Dr. Who.

From these examples: dismal workers, schoolboys in skirts, guerrilla gardeners, subversive knitters and culturally subversive film posters, it seems to me that experiencing and causing bemusement share two inter-related qualities. First, all of the activities are *politicised* in the

sense that they are somewhat absurd responses to aspects of social or institutional order, but nonetheless can unsettle attempts to maintain it. For example, I almost felt sorry for the Council officials who told the local press that planting in potholes 'did not meet the required standards' and that none of the boys were 'put in isolation or detention for wearing a skirt'. Bemusement is reinforced by the fact that these officials took these events so seriously. In doing so, they made their own responses sound ridiculous. Second, these activities are *pleasurable*. Mr. Dorley-Brown derives much pleasure from his 'work' as a guerrilla gardener; some of the schoolboys enjoyed the protest so much that they went 'the extra mile and shaved their legs'; Shiden Tekle's dad enjoyed being James Bond (albeit briefly); and the 'Dismals' found pleasure in continuously enacting their miserable-faced emotional labour. In this contradictory state/ State, people can discover that it is not necessary to know what was going on, or to be so fully connected to established norms of behaviour and action. This is a 'Wonderland' (McCabe, 2016), that confounds the stability, order and rationality of organizational life.

Inspiring Bemusement

'Entry level anarchism'

Anarchism is a doctrine that seeks to liberate people from political domination and economic exploitation by encouraging direct or non-governmental action. Various groups interpret this doctrine differently. Here, the focus is on the aesthetic dimension of liberation, building on an association with art. Anarchism, from this perspective, 'is a revolutionary movement directed towards the need to overcome the alienation, boredom and consumerism of everyday life. Its essence lies in challenging the system through cultural subversion, creating confusion to highlight the oppressiveness of accepted norms and values' (Kinna, 2005, p. 8).

Banksy's description of Dismaland as 'entry level anarchism' (Guru-Murthy, 2015) is instructive. Dismaland can be understood as an effort to disrupt institutions, to comment on the state of our social order, our values and norms. However, in this context, I believe that it may also be productive to think of Dismaland as a temporary *institution of disruption*. It represents, if not an alternative institution, then at least an alternative view of the lived experience of institutions. It provides a short term but very public approach to unsettling 'regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities

and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life' (Scott, 2014, p. 56). It does this by presenting a concurrent, 'sinister twist' on stability and meaning. Inspirational aspects of bemusement arise from the mobilization of contrasting social processes – schoolboys in skirts, flowers in pot-holes, tanks in knitted blankets, black faces in film posters – that tell us so much about who we are and how we live, by unsettling certainties, inviting deeper interpretation, and offering visual comment on and protest about how the world is. Bemusement belongs to the creative edge of disruption.

Mixed emotions

In addition to contrasting processes, bemusement mobilizes mixed emotions. We can feel perplexed, mystified, astonished, as well as pleasantly or painfully discombobulated. As I indicated in the introduction, my view is that mixed emotions span the boundary between persons' responses to institutional reproduction and resistance; between their connection and disconnection with the social order. They point to the inseparability of maintenance and disruption in persons' institutional effort. Bemusement can be an outcome of a person's ability and desire to hold on to confusing experiences, and thereby become a stimulus for creative disruption.

For example, one of the dynamics that ties all my illustrations together is that they *play to an audience* in deliberate and visual ways. In Disneyland, employees are not called employees but 'cast members… because they are putting on a show' (Lee, 2015). In Dismaland, the dismals also put on a seriously ridiculous show of being both miserable and mocking. In Disneyland, cast members are not allowed to say 'I don't know' to visitors. In Dismaland, not knowing what was going on (but reacting anyway) was an essential criterion in the person specification. The dismals got considerable pleasure from engaging miserably with their audience in this upside-down institutional order, but their responses show that they were often just as bemused as their audience (Youds, 2016). My examples align with the suggested effects of a logic of absurdity. A certain freedom emerges when a person knowingly and willfully chooses irrational action; when she can both demonstrate the capacity for rational judgment and simultaneously exercise the right to willfully ignore it (Newark, 2018).

Public reflection and legitimacies of interpretation

The surfacing of absurdities can also be considered as an approach to 'public reflection' (Raelin, 2001). Public reflection is necessarily undertaken in the company of others (with an audience). As a result, it creates distinctive inter-personal dynamics of accountability, authority and learning. It does this in a variety of ways. The purpose of public reflection is to help to make the gap between what we say and do both apparent and discussable. It makes different values, biases and their consequences visible. It provides an environment within which we can distinguish 'what is measured and critical from that which might be self-fulfilling and self-justificatory' (Raelin, 2001, p. 15). It provides a forum in which to openly engage with the political complexities of institutional life. Public reflection aims to create external accountability at the same time as giving public voice to personal intent. It is therefore an approach that raises questions about the impact of links between persons and the social order within which persons reside.

However, a tension that is characteristic of such forms of critical reflection is that they make prevailing relations of power, control and domination more visible. In doing so, they also tend to provoke an organizational response from people in positions of power, which is to say that public reflection can mobilize individual and collective defenses against reflection (Vince, Abbey, Bell and Langenhan, 2017). For example, my local Council is absolutely correct, Jason Dorley-Brown's efforts to fill potholes 'do not meet the required standards'. The Council has a public duty, and it is important that the institution complies with national standards of road maintenance and safety. However, this doesn't mean that they seem any less ridiculous in making such a response to planted potholes. Both interpretations in this example are important, and *together* they say something valuable about the way in which the institution does and does not work. In broader terms, Dismaland divided opinion in the UK national press. At the same time, it was both 'a charade where everyone has to pretend that this is a better joke than it is' (Jones, 2015); and 'an extraordinary, shocking and funny experience from the moment you step through the gates' (Guru-Murthy, 2015). The art and impact of bemusement comes from finding that both interpretations are inseparably valuable.

Bemusement Dynamics

It is not always easy to separate the targets of attempts to bemuse, the owners of attempts at creative disruption, or the audiences that may or may not be bemused. In the examples I have given, there are a range of targets: my MBA students, male managers, the inconsistencies of

local government rules, the white-faced film industry, the complicity of politicians in wars, the commercial art establishment. There are a range of owners of attempts to bemuse: a disconcerting professor, a determined MBA student, anarchistic artists, emboldened schoolboys, impassioned knitters and subversive advertisers. However, the mixed emotions and organizational tensions that characterize bemusement (as I have described it) can be disruptive in both directions. Mobilizing an alternative view of the lived experience of institutions through attempts to bemuse may offer creative opportunities to disrupt, but such attempts also remain unpredictable, and disruption is not necessarily to the detriment of established order.

For example, on the evening of Friday 5th October 2018, at Sotheby's in London, Banksy's painting 'girl with balloon' was being auctioned. Shortly after the gavel came down on a price of 1.04 Million GBP, the painting started to shred itself (Johnston, 2018). The artist had built a shredder into the original frame just in case the piece came up for auction. The faces of the audience to this event show several reactions, some are horrified, others are bewildered, some are clearly amused. About two-thirds of the painting shredded, and the shredded pieces of canvas were seen dangling from below the frame, before being promptly whisked away by auction-room staff. The artist's intensions were interpreted as 'a stunning piece of site-specific, mechanically-aided, performance art; an attention-grabbing spectacle taking place within an attention-grabbing spectacle, which highlighted through dark satire how art has become an investment commodity to be auctioned off to ultra-wealthy trophy-hunters' (Gompertz, 2018); and as 'one of the most audacious stunts in art history' (Johnston, 2018).

Sotheby's struck back. A spokesman said: 'The new narrative is that Banksy did not destroy a work …he created one, adding value not detracting'. It was even provided with a new name, 'Love is in the Bin'. Alex Branczik, Sotheby's head of contemporary art, Europe, said: 'Following his surprise intervention on the night, we are pleased to confirm the sale of the artist's newly titled Love Is in the Bin, the first artwork in history to have been created live during an auction' (Busby, 2018a). The same BBC arts commentator had seen 'dark satire' concluded that: 'This is what I think about Love is in the Bin. It will come to be seen as one of the most significant artworks of the early 21st Century' (Gompertz, 2018). Its value was now estimated at 2 Million GBP. While a sceptical public thought that Sotheby's must have

been ‘in on the act’ (Busby, 2018b), which they denied, Banksy uploaded a video saying that the entire canvas was supposed to shred, and not just two thirds of it. A clip of a canvas shredding in full is seen in the video with the caption: ‘In rehearsals, it worked every time’ (BBC News, 2018).

In this dance between creative disruption and the re-emergence of order it is difficult to say that bemusement is positioned in only one place, that owners and targets are separate. However, it is not difficult to see bemusement on the faces of those at the auction, to hear it in responses from Sotheby’s, and to read it in the copy of arts and entertainment journalists. The target of Banksy’s ‘prank’ was the art establishment and the subversion in public of one of its rituals (the auction) in real time. However, Banksy must have been somewhat bemused by the failure of his internal shredder to complete its job. The art establishment (Sotheby’s) also bemused the press and the public through its quick rebranding of the piece and measured denial of complicity or prior knowledge. The whole story manages to depict both a powerful response to and from established order, as well as a narrative of the pleasurably absurd.

Conclusion

In this essay I have been reflecting on the disruptive potential of bemusement. I was inspired originally in this regard by Dismaland Bemusement Park, a temporary art installation in Weston-super-Mare, UK. This exhibition of modern art and ‘entry-level anarchism’ raised a question for me about the potential role of the affective tensions that are integral to being bemused, and the extent to which they might unsettle persons’ emotional investment in institutional order. I asked myself, what is the nature of the emotional investment in disrupting institutional ideals that bemusement might stimulate? At the heart of my answer is the creative energy for institutional disruption that arises from the confusion and pleasure of bemusement; from the mixed emotions it mobilizes. Mixed emotions help us to recognize that persons are caught up in ‘consistently inconsistent’ patterns (Smith, 2014) in our lived experience of institutional order; and that contradiction can be an important affective impetus for *creative disruption*. As I mentioned earlier and illustrated above, tensions that arise from mixed emotions reveal the inseparability of creation and disruption as concurrent elements in persons’ efforts within institutions.

My essay develops a theoretical connection between bemusement and disruptive work. Existing literature has shown that institutional disruption arises in at least three ways. First, from adherence to counter-values (Cascio & Luthans, 2014). In Dismaland Bemusement Park, an aesthetic dimension of anarchism is mobilized to challenge established consumer values and the social system that supports them. It offers counter-values represented, for example, in the joyfully miserable emotional labor of the 'Dismals'. Second, through persistence over time (Styhre, 2014). The shredding of 'girl with a balloon' was not the first time that Banksy had sought to disrupt the art establishment, but the painting was placed in its mock-Victorian frame in 2006 (Gompertz, 2018), and remained ready all that time for its brief, iconoclastic moment of self-destruction/ self-creation. Third, by dis-embedding actors from their ideological attachments and re-embedding them within the norms of a new community of actors (Ruebottom and Auster, 2018). My MBA students enter my module with a relentless attachment to the desire for me to make them into 'a better leader'. They are stuck in the prevalent vision of leadership as individual and positive. The use of bemusement to confound expectations about leadership as it is experienced and felt contributes to students' reflexive capabilities, and to the creative disruption of expected ways to learn about leadership.

Finally, I introduce a new connection between bemusement and disruptive work that involves *surfacing the absurdities that are part of what is accepted as normal*. My examples all speak to absurdities within institutional order and to the potential value in making them visible through different attempts at or experiences of bemusement. This perspective connects with recent ideas about organizations and institutions. First, that such absurdities point to the 'Wonderland' that can become visible (McCabe, 2016). Second, that in terms of individual decision making within an organizational context, a certain freedom can emerge from willful irrationality (Newark, 2018). Third, the lived experience of institutions is shaped both by institutional logics *and* institutional illogics (Vince, 2018). The idea of 'illogics' suggests that our frames of reference, the 'rules of the game' (Fan & Zietsma, 2017), are illusory and nonrational, despite also feeling natural or normal.

My argument, therefore, is that the disruptive potential of bemusement is enhanced when absurdities that are at the heart of what is accepted as normal are brought to the surface. I am asserting the importance of confounding stability, order and rationality by recognizing the parallel existence of confusion, absurdity and illogics. Practical access to these parallel

dynamics arises from the art of cultural subversion, however it is enacted. Such an art both politicizes and gives pleasure to those involved in creative disruption; and it embraces the ensuing confusion as a critique – as a potentially insightful 'sinister twist' on institutional order.

References

BBC News, (2017). 'Guerrilla Gardeners'. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-39895948 (12 May 2017).

BBC News, (2018). Banksy: How Love is in the Bin's shredding did not go to plan. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-45900314 (18 October 2018).

Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London: SAGE Publications.

Busby, M. (2018). Woman who bought shredded Banksy artwork will go through with the purchase. The Guardian online, 11th October 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/11/woman-who-bought-shredded-banksy-artwork-will-go-through-with-sale?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (Retrieved 11th October 2018).

Busby, M. (2018). Shredded Banksy: Was Sotheby's in on the act? The Guardian online, 13 October 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/13/shredded-banksy-was-sothebys-in-on-the-act?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (Retrieved 13th October 2018).

Cascio, W. F. & Luthans, F. (2014). Reflections on the metamorphosis at Robben Island: The role of institutional work and positive psychological capital. Journal of Management Inquiry, 23(1), 51-67.

Contu, A. (2008). Decaf resistance: On misbehavior, cynicism, and desire in liberal workplaces. *Management Communications Quarterly*, *21*, 364–379.

Creed, W. E. D., Hudson, B. A., Okhuysen, G. A., & Smith-Crowe, K. (2014). Swimming in a Sea of Shame: Incorporating emotion into explanations of institutional reproduction and change. Academy of Management Review, 39(3), 275-301.

Cunliffe, A. (2016). On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner Redux: What Does It Mean to *Be* Reflexive? Management Learning, 40(6): 740-746.

Danaeefard, H. and Boustani, H. R. (2016). Injustice perceptions and employees misbehaviour in a public organization: Exploration the mediating role of employee's cynicism to organization. International Journal of Human Capital in Urban Management 1(1), 9-18.

Dean, J. W., Brandes, P. and Dharwadkar, R. (1998). Organizational Cynicism. Academy of Management Review, 23(2), 341-352.

Fan, G. H. & Zietsma, C. (2017). Constructing a Shared Governance Logic: The role of emotions in enabling dually embedded agency. Academy of Management Journal, 60(6), 2321-2351.

Gill, M. J. & Burrow, R. D. (2017). The function of fear in institutional maintenance: Feeling frightened as an essential ingredient in haute cuisine. Organization Studies (currently available at Sage Online First).

Gompertz, W. (2018). Will Gompertz on Banksy's Love is in the Bin. BBC News, online. Retrieved from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-45818204 (13th October 2018).

Green, C. (2015). Dismaland: Banksy's 'bemusement park' is deeply unsettling... but bizarrely entertaining. The Independent, 21st August 2015.

Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Sahlin, K. & Suddaby, R. (2008). 'Introduction'. In Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Kerstin Sahlin & Roy Suddaby (Eds.) The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism (pp. 1-46), London, Sage.

Guru-Murthy, K. (2015). Channel 4 News, online. Retrieved from http://www.channel4.com/news/dismaland-banksy-bemusement-park-shocking-funny-extraordinary (16th Oct 2016).

Holmes, J. (2000). Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace. *Discourse Studies*, *2*, 159–185.

Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Sherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), Handbook of Affective Sciences, 11, (pp. 852–870). Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Huber, G. and Brown, A. (2017). Identity work, humour and disciplinary power. Organization Studies, 38(8), 1107-1126.

Jarvis, L. (2017). Feigned versus Felt: Feigning behaviors and the dynamics of institutional logics. Academy of Management Review, 42(2), 306-333.

Johnston, C. (2018). Banksy auction stunt leaves art world in shreds. The Guardian Online, 6th October 2018. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/06/banksy-sothebys-auction-prank-leaves-art-world-in-shreds-girl-with-balloon?CMP=fb_gu. (6th October 2018).

Jones, J. (2015). 'In Dismaland, Banksy has created something truly depressing'. The Guardian Online, 21st August 2015. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/aug/21/in-dismaland-banksy-has-created-something-truly-depressing (17th October 2016).

Kinna, R. (2005). Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide. Oxford, Oneworld Publications.

Lee, M. (2015). Why are Disneyland employees called 'cast members'? Retrieved from: https://www.quora.com/Why-are-Disneyland-employees-called-cast-members (February 22, 2018).

Lok, J., Creed, W. E. D., DeJordy, R. & Voronov, M. (2017). 'Living Institutions: Bringing emotions into organizational institutionalism'. In Royston Greenwood, Christine Oliver, Thomas Lawrence and Renate Meyer (Eds.) The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism (2nd ed., pp 591-620). London, Sage.

Massa, F., Helms, W., Voronov, M., & Wang, L. (2016). Emotions Uncorked: Inspiring evangelism for the emerging practice of cool climate winemaking in Ontario. Academy of Management Journal, 60(2), 461-499.

McCabe, D. (2016). 'Curiouser and Curioser!': Organizations as Wonderland – a metaphorical alternative to the rational model. Human Relations, 69(4), 945-973.

Moisander, J. K., Hirsto, H. & Fahy. K. M. (2016). Emotions in Institutional Work: A discursive perspective. Organization Studies, 37(7), 963-990.

Morris, S. (2017). 'Teenage boys wear skirts to school to protest against "no shorts" policy'. *The Guardian Online*, Thursday 22nd June 2017. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/22/teenage-boys-wear-skirts-to-school-protest-no-shorts-uniform-policy (27th October 2017).

Neate, R. (2018). 'Young Brixton activists recreate film posters with black leads' The Guardian Online, March 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/03/young-brixton-activists-recreate-film-posters-with-black-leads (retrieved March 3, 2018).

Newark, D. (2018). Leadership and the logics of absurdity. Academy of Management Review (in press). Available online at: http://amr.aom.org/content/early/2017/02/06/amr.2015.0186.abstract

O'Neill, B. (2015). Banksy: the master of middle-class misanthropy. Spiked Online, 23 August 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/banksy-the-master-of-middle-class-misanthropy/17336#.Wz4X-xIzY1g (9 July 2018).

Raelin, J. (2001). Public reflection as the basis of learning. Management Learning, 32(1), 11-30.

Ruebottom, T. and Auster, E. R. (2018). Reflexive dis/embedding: Personal narratives, empowerment and the emotional dynamics of interstitial events. Organization Studies, 39(4), 467-490.

Scott, W. R. (2014). Institutions and Organizations (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Simha, A., Elloy, D. F. and Huang, H-C. (2014). The moderated relationship between job burnout and organizational cynicism. Management Decision, 52(3), 482-504.

Smith, W. (2014). Dynamic Decision Making: A model of senior leaders managing strategic paradoxes. Academy of Management Journal, 57(6), 1592-1623.

Styhre, A. (2014). Gender equality as institutional work: The case of the church in Sweden. Gender, Work and Organization, 21(2), 105-120.

Toubiana, M. & Zietsma, C. (2017). The message is on the wall? Emotions, social media and the dynamics of institutional complexity. Academy of Management Journal, 60(3), 922-953.

Vince, R. (2018). Institutional Illogics: The unconscious and institutional analysis. Organization Studies (available online at Sage Online First).

Vince, R., Abbey, G., Bell, D. & Langenhan, M. (2018). Finding Critical Action Learning Through Paradox: The role of action learning in the suppression and stimulation of critical reflection. Management Learning, 49(1), 86-106.

Voronov, M. & Vince, R. (2012) Integrating Emotions into the Analysis of Institutional Work. Academy of Management Review, 37(1), 58 – 81.

Westwood, R. (2004). Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in organizational comedic theatre. Organization Studies, *25*, 775–795.

Westwood, R., & Rhodes, C. (2007). *Humour, work and organization*. London: Routledge.

Wright, A. L., Zammuto, R. F., & Liesch, P. W. (2017). Maintaining the Values of a Profession: Institutional work and moral emotions in the emergency department. Academy of Management Journal, 60(1), 200-237.

Youds, B. (2016). Dismal. Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd.

Table 1: A comparison of humour, cynicism and bemusement

	Humour	*Cynicism*	*Bemusement*
Definition	"Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the quality of action or speech that causes amusement', management and organization scholars regard humour as a type of communication that recognizes incongruities in meanings and is accompanied by either laughter or smiling" (Huber and Brown, 2017 p 1109).	"Organizational cynicism is a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, comprising three dimensions: (1) a **belief** that the organization lacks integrity; (2) negative **affect** toward the organization; and (3) tendencies to disparaging and critical **behaviors** toward the organization that are consistent with these beliefs and affect" (Dean et al, 1998 p 345 *original emphasis*).	Bemusement is an affective state characterised by feelings of confusion or pleasure, as well as concurrent mixed feelings of *both* confusion *and* pleasure, that unsettle people and organizations. For the person, feelings of confusion may arise from bewilderment or perplexity, from a sense of not knowing what is going on. Alternatively, a person may experience wry pleasure or surprise at feeling unsettled, leading to a new perspective or insight. Bemusement is of interest to management and organizational scholars for the ways in which it can confound established expectations or norms.
Emotional Orientation	Humour is primarily (although not exclusively) seen as a positive emotion.	Cynicism is primarily (although not exclusively) seen as a negative emotion.	Bemusement is a mixed emotion that contains both positive and negative aspects.
Ongoing Tensions	*Tension between the subversiveness of humour and its limitations in disrupting social order.* Humour can be disruptive and subversive (Holmes, 2000; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). At the same time, it is acknowledged that the challenge of humour is limited (Westwood, 2004); it is unlikely to change persons' embeddedness in social order (Contu, 2008); and it can also contribute to processes of control.	*Tension between a 'healthy cynicism' that moderates excessive claims and behaviours; and persistent feelings of alienation from the organization*. Cynicism can emerge as much from a sense of justice (Danaeefard and Boustani, 2016) as it does from (e.g.) feelings of injustice, alienation or 'burnout' (Simha, Elloy and Huang, 2014).	*Tension between feelings (of confusion and wry amusement) that both undermine and encourage the ability to think.* Confusion or bewilderment may contain feelings of (e.g.) anxiety, which then disorientate, and thereby undermine a person's ability to think clearly. Bemusement can also promote a wry satisfaction or amusement at unsettling one's own, or others' view of reality. This can encourage a person's capacity to think 'outside of the box'.

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

Image 6


Brixton
Station
JCDecaux
IF YOU'RE SURPRISED, IT MEANS YOU DON'T SEE ENOUGH BLACK PEOPLE IN MAJOR ROLES.
Harry Potter
AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS
JOIN US ON OUR MISSION FOR BETTER BLACK REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA
@legallyblackuk
LEGALLY BLACK